

## COMMUNITY SCHEDULE

### January/February

Immaculate Conception – Bronx  
 Inter-Provincial Novitiate – Toronto  
 Seelos House – Chicago

### March/April

St. Mary of the Assumption – Whittier  
 Sacred Heart – Seattle  
 St. Michael – Chicago

### May/June

Mission House – Liguori  
 St. Clement Health Care Center – Liguori  
 St. Alphonsus “Rock” – St. Louis  
 Our Lady of Perpetual Help – Kansas City

### July/August

St. Gerard – Baton Rouge  
 St. Alphonsus – New Orleans  
 Our Mother of Sorrows & Blessed Seelos – Biloxi  
 Hispanic Initiative – Greenwood

### September/October

St. Alphonsus – Grand Rapids  
 St. Alphonsus – Minneapolis  
 Holy Ghost – Houston  
 St. Gerard & C.Ss.R. Apostolic Center – San Antonio

### November/December

Provincial Residence – Denver  
 Redemptorist Renewal Center – Tucson  
 Desert House of Prayer – Tucson  
 Pagani House & Redemptorist Retreat Center – Oconomowoc



Left to right: Fr. Rob Ruhnke with the award he received recognizing his contribution to families; and Colleen Gerke, NACFLM president, presenting the award.

Photos by Elizabeth Reha

## Father Rob Ruhnke Honored

by Kristine Stremel

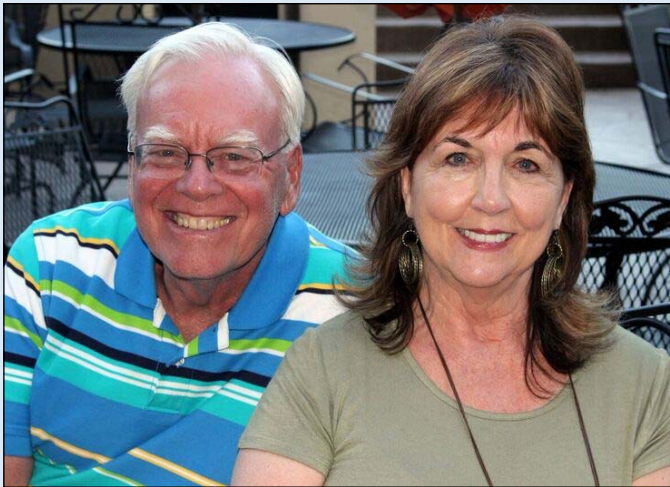
Our own Fr. Rob Ruhnke was honored last week for “significant and lasting contribution to families” through *For Better and For Ever*, his marriage preparation sponsor couple program. The National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers (NACFLM) presented the coveted award during a banquet at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.

“Fr. Rob continues to expand the reach of *For Better and For Ever* through translations and updates for multicultural, non-Catholic and secular audiences. It has become the most widely used program of its kind in the Americas,” explained Colleen Gerke, NACFLM president. “He exemplifies the mission of NACFLM by his commitment to the sponsor couple method of marriage preparation and awareness of its diversity enables family life ministry to provide accompaniment to couples and families.”

Seminarian Huy Vu is already collaborating with the Vietnamese community, which is coping with an increase in divorce rates. “He’s learning from the ground up, just like I did,” Fr. Rob said. “He will be ordained to the priesthood in two years, but he is already considered a valuable member of the *For Better and For Ever* resource team.”

According to Fr. Rob, *For Better and For Ever* was conceived four decades ago just like many folks: a happy ‘accident.’ Way back in 1975, the Family

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Left to right, from top: Fr. Rob Ruhnke with friends Bruce and Julie Leinberger; Fr. Rob speaks at the banquet; and John and Sharon Harry, who have collaborated with Fr. Rob since 1970 on PreCana, Engaged Encounter and the Sponsor Couple program.

Life Office of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston was confident that the Engaged Encounter Program that the staff and volunteers had developed was the best marriage preparation program in the USA.

“There was only one problem: we knew we could never provide enough weekends to accommodate all the couples who would like to take part,” he said. “We began an intensive search for ideas and programs we could use to create a ‘second-best’ option, and eliminate the other programs we believed were simply not worth recommending to parishes in the archdiocese.”

After months of discussions with those considered marriage preparation leaders, Fr. Rob and his staff met with the key lay volunteer couples who were facilitating the Engaged Encounter and Pre Cana programs. One of the volunteer couples asked, “Why have we not tried the ‘sponsor couple program’ created by Msgr. Edmond Carmody, the Family Life Director of the Archdiocese of San Antonio?”

“I knew the ‘we’ was really ‘me,’” Fr. Rob explained. “I had thought a great deal about Carmody’s ‘experiment,’ but I kept imagining all the things that could possibly

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*Left to right, from left: The Holy Family, the model for the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers; and Fr. Rob with a few of the long-time associates who were present when he received the NACFLM award last week in Washington, DC.*

go wrong if we sent an engaged couple to meet with a married couple in their home without anyone – like me! – to supervise. If things went badly, the bishop would hold me responsible because I would have assured him that we would offer the best possible program we could provide for the thousands of couples we could not accommodate in the fully booked Engaged Encounter weekends.”

The “unplanned” moment came as Fr. Rob began to answer the question and was interrupted with, “How do you know it is likely to go badly? What do you know of Carmody’s experience at this point, and why he is continuing the experiment?” After a pregnant pause, Fr. Rob suggested that they meet with Msgr. Carmody. They did, and the rest is history.

Lay couples were encouraged enough to set up a pilot program in Houston, and the first sponsor couples were from Holy Ghost Parish and St. Francis de Sales Parish. Each of them sponsored an engaged couple. “The feedback from both the sponsor couples and the couples preparing for marriage was so positive that I began to believe that my fears were unrealistic,” Fr. Rob said. “Though I could not yet prove it, there was something about the process of sponsorship that helped both the engaged and married sponsor couples take more personal responsibility for their calling to the vocation of marriage and family life.”

That unplanned challenge of one couple in 1975 was the beginning of a journey. In 1980, Roger Marchand, a former Liguori Publications staff member and Fr. Rob’s personal friend, took an interest in the program as a possible product to be published. “I was skeptical because I could not imagine how training could be provided for parishes all over the country, but Roger assured me that we would solve that challenge by creating video training materials. Fr. Norm Muckerman, who also worked at Liguori Publications in those days, dubbed the program “*For Better and For Ever*” when it was published in 1981. Although Roger Marchand died unexpectedly in 1985 before the video training materials were produced, *For Better and For Ever* was selling very well, and no one was complaining about Fr. Rob’s Training Manual. Liguori Publications was very pleased that sales continued to grow, but as a publisher, hoped to stimulate sales with an updated version. The best was yet to come: the second edition.

Published in 1989, the second edition was an effort to incorporate key ideas from the fields of psychology and adult education and theology that had – up to that time – never been adequately addressed in marriage preparation programs. “The most glaring missing piece was a way to deal with each person’s Family of Origin and its likely role in the success or failure of a marriage,” Fr. Rob explained.

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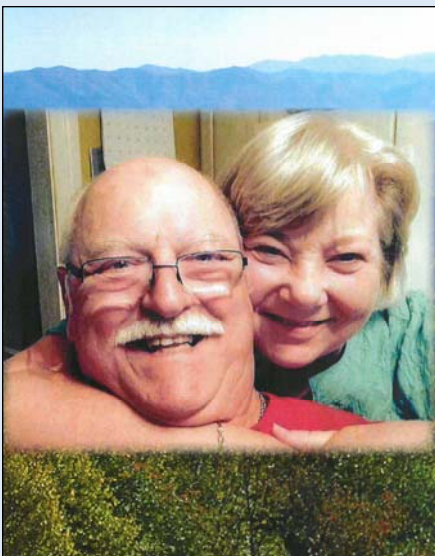


Fr. Rob Ruhnke (*second from left*) with the *For Better and For Ever* Resource Team, including (*from far right, back row*) Huy Vu and Fr. Dick Mevissen, during this year's annual gathering. Provincial Superior Stephen Rehrauer (*fourth from right, back row*) participated and lent his support to the ministry.

Although Liguori Publications thought it was time to update *For Better and For Ever*, Fr. Rob was still researching and developing a plan to address Family of Origin. "I was not convinced the 1989 edition was good enough, but it was a beginning," Fr. Rob said. Then in 1995, he had an 'Aha! Moment.'

"How could I be 55 years old with a ton of experience and ideas about marriage preparation and suddenly have a totally new idea? Well, I imagined myself as a pastor, sitting at my desk, when the parish secretary escorts a young couple into my office. They explain that they are not married or engaged to be married, but want to speak to me because they understand that I have a lot of interest in marriage preparation. They ask what they should study together to learn whether it would be wise for them to marry!

"This was as important as the unplanned moment in 1975, but this time I did not react by becoming defensive. It was more like my first experience of seeing a film in color rather than in black and white. Of course! That is what we should have been doing all these years, rather than hiding the content of marriage preparation programs and only offering them as content in our talks. To the imaginary couple in my office, I said: 'I know now the book I have to write to provide the help you are looking for.' In real life, that book is the current edition of *For Better and For Ever*."



## Dedicated Partners in Mission

Fr. Rob Ruhnke relies on a dedicated network of sponsor couples to implement his *For Better and For Ever* marriage preparation program. Without them, the program simply wouldn't be possible.

Dick and Jeanne Huiras are in their 30th year as sponsors, and enjoy helping couples in Houston become aware of the things that will bring them closer together and those that might drive them farther apart. They have sponsored more than 60 couples, with only about a 9% divorce rate – rather dramatic, considering that the general population statistic is at 50%.

Sponsor couples report that the program helps their relationships grow just as much as the engaged couples they mentor, said Diane Stefanic, Marriage Preparation Coordinator at St. John Parish in Hollywood, MD, where the program was established in 2005. Diane and her husband, Dave, have mentored quite a few couples in the past 12 years. She considers all of them, as well as other sponsor couples, part of her family.

Diane recently asked for prayer support for Joseph and Marian Bowser, one of the parish's most beloved sponsor couples who joyfully mentored 25 young couples. "Joe entered the Catholic Church because of his experience reaching out to young couples," Diane said. "Many miracles surrounded them in the love that they gave so generously. Joe died on May 5, after a six-week hospitalization. Marian did not leave his side during the entire time, giving us such a beautiful witness of the love and fidelity that they shared in their marriage."

Sponsor couples across the country also are grieving the recent death of Tom McCosby, who died last Christmas morning of a heart attack at the age of 81 in New Castle, PA. His widow, Mary Ann "Boots," said he was the spiritual leader of the family, which includes 11 children, 34 grandchildren and 8 great-grandchildren.

Sponsor couples form a tight-knit group, united by their faith and belief in building up strong families as the cornerstone of society. "Thank you, Fr. Rob, for the lives of so many who have been touched and changed by this ministry – both the engaged and especially the sponsor couples," Diane said.

Left to right, from top: Dick and Jeanne Huiras; Fr. Rob Ruhnke conducts a video conference call; Diane and Dave Stefanic; and Joseph and Marian Bowser.